DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 893 SO 014 055

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TITLE On the Application of Qualitative Research to the Policy Process: An Emergent Linkage.
PUB DATE Jan 83
NOTE 29p.; Print marginally legible.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Decision Making; Ethnography; *Policy Formation; *Public Policy; *Research Needs; *Research Utilization; Social Science Research
IDENTIFIERS *Qualitative Studies

ABSTRACT

The linkage between policy research and policy formation can be strengthened through the use of qualitative methods. Currently, the linkage between policy research and policy decision making is tenuous; there are differences in philosophy, function self-definition, and criteria by which success is measured. Although research cannot dictate the use of policy research findings, it can influence the reception and use of policy research, particularly at the stage when programs are initiated, target populations identified, and resources allocated. Utilization of research can be greatly enhanced when the researcher considers the appropriateness of the study design and of the execution of the study, the absence of major conceptual errors, relevance, timeliness, presentation, and impact. These criteria for policy research can be more effectively met through qualitative research, e.g., ethnography, field studies, and case studies. Qualitative research can inform the decision-making process through its analysis of the complexity of the social system, its complement to statistical analysis, and its study of the unanticipated consequences of social change. By examining the social settings and organizations of our societies, qualitative research can inform of existing conditions and thus can enlighten policy formation. (KC)

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ON THE APPLICATION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TO THE POLICY PROCESS: AN EMERGENT LINKAGE

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"There is no body of methods; no comprehensive methodology for the study of the impact of public policy as an aid to future policy."

James Coleman, 1972

Introduction

A decade later, Coleman's now famous quote still rings true. Indeed, one can argue that in the intervening years, the tendency in policy research and analysis has become even more centrifugal, spinning off more methodologies, more conceptual frameworks, and more disarray among those who work under the rubric of "policy studies." A number of thoughtful critics of the current scene of policy studies and the attendant methodologies have argued that any improvements in the techniques of policy research have not

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led to greater clarity about what to do or what to think. Instead, these improvements have led to a greater sense of complexity and confusion (cf. Cohen and Weiss, 1977). More charitably, it could be argued that the multiplicity of approaches to policy research should be welcomed as they bring different skills and strengths to what are admittedly difficult and complex educational issues.

Regardless of whether one supports or challenges the contention that policy research has had a contrifugal impact on the knowledge base relevant to decision making, the bottom line remains much the same: what policy researchers tend to consider as improvements in their craft have not significantly enhanced the role of research in policymaking. Instead, the proliferation of persons, institutes, and centers conducting policy-related work has led to more variation in the manner by which problems are defined, more divergence in the way in which studies are designed and conducted, and more disagreement and controversy over the ways in which data are analyzed and findings reported. The policymaker now confronts a veritable glut of conflicting research information.

A sobering but provocative counterintuitive logic is at work here: increased personnel, greater allocation of resources, and growing sophistication of methods have not had the anticipated effect of greater clarity and understanding of the policy issues before us. Rather, current efforts have led to a more complex, complicated, and partial view of the issues and their solutions.

While one may grant that early policy work in education, for example, was frequently simplistic and not especially sophisticated in its designs or application of methods, the inverse does not, in and of itself, work to the advantage of the policymaker. To receive a report resplendent with "state of the art" methodologies and complex analyses that tease out every nuance and shade of meaning on an issue may provide just as little guidance for effective decision making as did the former circumstances. Stated differently, a fixation on the technical adequacy of policy research without a commensurate concern for its utilization is to relegate that work to quick obscurity (cf. Chelimsky, 1982).

If this admittedly brief description of the current state of policy reseach approximates the reality, then a fundamental question arises: What ought to be the role of research in informing the policy process? This question I take to be central to the focus of our deliberations here over the next several days. I should like, in the pages of this paper, first to address certain generic aspects of both policy decision making and policy research, and second, to address the several contributions of ethnographic research in particular to effecting a linkage between the two.

The Nature of Policy Decision Making

Policy decision making is multidimensional and multifaceted. Research is but one (and often minor at that) among a number of often contradictory and competing sources that seek to influence what is an ongoing and constantly evolving process. I stress here

the term "process" because I should choose to describe policy decision making as more or less unbounded, as characterized by actors who arrive on the scene (often unannounced) and leave again, as not delimited by clearly defined constraints of time and location, and as often as not neither purposeful nor calculated. Such a description suggests the antithesis of the conventional understanding of decision making. In this latter, more traditional approach, decision making is understood as a discrete event, undertaken by a defined set of actors working in "real time" and moving to their decision on the basis of their analysis of alternatives.

Weiss has nicely summarized this notion of "decision making as an event" when she writes (1982:23):

> Both the popular and the academic literature picture decision making as an event; a group of authorized decision makers assemble at particular times and places, review a problem (or opportunity), consider a number of alternative courses of action with more or less explicit calculation of the advantages and disadvantages of each option, weigh the alternatives against their goals or preferences, and then select an alternative that seems well suited for achieving their purposes. The result is a decision.

She also nicely demolishes this view when she writes (1982:26):

> Given the fragmentation of authority across multiple bureaus, departments, and legislative committees, and the disjointed stages by which actions coalesce into decisions,

the traditional model of decision making is a highly stylized rendition of reality. Identification of any clear-cut group of decison makers can be difficult. (Sometimes a middle-level bureaucrat has taken the key action, although he or she may be unaware that his or her action was going to be--or was--decisive.) The goals of policy are often equaily diffuse, except in terms of "taking care of" some undesirable situation. Which opinions are considered, and what set of advantages and disadvantages are assessed, may be impossible to tell in the interactive, multiparticipant, diffuse process of formulating policy. The complexity of governmental decision making often defies neat compartmentalization.

Of particular relevance here is that the focus on decision making as an ongoing set of adjustments, or mid-course corrections, eliminates the bind of having to pinpoint the event--that is, the exact time, place, and manner--in which research has been influential. Parenthetically, because the specifics can seldom be supplied, the notion that research should impact on decision-making events seems to have become more and more an article of faith. That researchers have so persistently misunderstood decision making, and yet constantly have sought to be of influence, is a situation deserving of considerably more analysis than it receives. So long as researchers presume that research findings must be brought to bear upon a single event, a discrete act of decision making, they will be missing those circumstances and processes where, in fact, research is and can be useful. However, the

reorientation to "process decision making" and away from "event decision making" necessitates looking at research as serving an "enlightenment function" in contrast to an "engineering function" (cf. Janowitz, 1971; Weiss, 1977). Policy research can illuminate, it cannot dictate.

I should emphasize here that these comments ought not be taken as a diatribe against research or an argument that knowledge counts for naught. Quite the contrary. Research is an important and necessary component of the decision-making process. Its relevance and usefulness will not become apparent, however, unless there is a reconsideration of what is understood by policy decision making. A redefinition is needed of the context in which to look for a linkage between knowledge and action. It is my position that a shift from quantitative to qualitative research methodologies is integral to this redefinition.

Research for Policy's Sake

Succinctly, the linkage between policy research and policy decision making is a tenuous one. On both sides, there are differences in philosophy, in function, in self-definition, and in criteria by which worth and success are measured. Given that these two domains--knowledge and action--do not necessarily overlap and often are mutually contradictory, it is not surprising that their engagement period has been such a difficult one. The effort to wed these two very dissimilar functions has not come easily.

Policymakers view themselves as flexible, decision oriented, pragmatic, and able to thrive in settings of high pressure and conflict. These characteristics are not part of the self-definition of researchers, nor are they attributed to them by others. Chelimsky has described researchers in the following way (1979:21):

> Researchers tend not to be very flexible. They have a design, they want to adhere to it, and they snarl if someone tries to tamper with their efforts in ways which they think are going to hurt or weaken their results. A typical researcher is not a pragmatist, he can't be. He's a seeker after truth, a knowledge fanatic, a juste, as the French would say. When he works with government officials and program managers or practitioners, he seems like a sort of Robespierre unleashed in a world of unsuspecting Dantons. Perhaps the most annoying thing about him is that he doesn't always understand those Dantons and doesn't realize that he doesn't understand. He certainly doesn't always approve of them either, and he makes that quite clear. He feels that they want things to be simple whereas he knows them to be complex. To many researchers, in fact, social programs often seem to be expressions of faith, of wishful thinking: the "hope springs eternal" of the political process.

There is also the need here briefly to distinguish between two levels of policy decision making. The first level involves the establishing of the broad parameters of government action, e.g.,

providing national health insurance, establishing a national energy policy, or restructuring the national immigration laws. At this level and in these instances, policy research input is likely to be quite small, if not nil. The setting of these national priorities is a political event, a coming together of a critical mass of politicians, special interest groups, and of persons in the media to generate the attention and focus necessary for the items to reach the national agenda. While one or another research study might be quoted during this phase of agenda setting, the initiative simply is not very reliant on research findings or implications.

At the second stage, however, where there is some agreement among a sizeable sector of the policy establishment that action ought to be taken, programs initiated, target populations identified, and resources allocated, the opportunities for policy research are much enhanced. At this stage, certain questions are amenable to influence from policy research--for example, questions of program performance, program improvement, delivery of services, comparisons among different program strategies, and decisions on where to allocate demonstration and model program funds.

To be amenable is but a precondition. The eventual utilization of policy research is something quite different.

The researcher cannot dictate the use of policy research findings, but it can be argued that the researcher is able to influence the eventual reception and use of policy research, in two broad

ways: through emphasis on technical adequacy and on usefulness. The researcher's concern with both is perhaps as much as can in good conscience be done in the hope of providing information and analysis that will be considered in the decision-making process. Chelimsky (1983, forthcoming) suggests that the technical adequacy component can be subdivided into three parts: 1) the appropriateness of the study design for answering the questions posed within the time and cost parameters assigned; 2) the appropriateness of the execution of the study in terms of the design selected and the resources allocated; and 3) the absence of major conceptual errors, the misapplication of technical procedures, and the drawing of improper or unwarranted conclusions and inferences. Likewise, she suggests a number of subparts to the usefulness component of a policy study. These include 4) relevance, 5) timeliness, 6) presentation, and 7) impact.

If the reasearcher takes these seven aspects of a policy study together (and is concerned with each of them during the course of the study), the likelihood of utilization should be considerably enhanced. But in the end there are no guarantees of influence and use with policy research; there are only opportunities that one more or less prepares for.

Much the same tenuousness characterizes the situation of the policymaker. He or she cannot guarantee that sponsored policy research will be used, even if that research meets the tests of technical adequacy and usefulness. The degree to which the policymaker is able to use policy relevant research depends on a number

of considerations, some of which are in his control, others of which are not. Where there is considerable pressure to create a program in concert with the philosophy of government in power at the time, research findings may be of little use. Likewise, where there are multiple constituencies organized against a particular policy initiative, quality report after quality report can have little impact on the eventual accommodation that must be achieved. Alternatively, in those instances where the policymaker has more discretion and is able to shape a newly authorized program, the opportunity for the use of policy research is heightened. The same can be said for those circumstances where there is an ongoing program that is perceived as weak, mismanaged, or simply not having the desired outcomes. A manager given the mandate to rethink and reorganize such a program also creates a situation conducive to the use of policy research.

The Contribution of Qualitative Research

Two remarkable and interrelated events have occurred in policy research in the past ten years. The first is the dissolution of the natural science model of inquiry as the preeminent model in policy studies. This approach, frequently referred to as "the scientific method," was lauded by Campbell and Stanley in 1963 as "the only available route to cumulative progress." The hegemony of this approach has dissolved as researchers have come to realize that there are multiple routes and multiple destinations for their efforts.

The causes of this recognition include the inability of the "scientific" approach (1) reasonably to address many of the most pressing issues, for example, in education or health or employment training; (2) to respect the fluidity and change in social environments; and (3) to address the question of program processes instead of program outcomes. In addition, the outright antagonism of many practitioners and policymakers to the sterile empiricism characterizing much of current research has forced new reflections on current practices. The limitations in the view that "what cannot be measured cannot be important" have become apparent for all to see.

The second of the changes, and related to the first, is that the conceptual vacuum created by the retreat of quantitative methods into an intellectual cul-de-sac has been filled by a growing and vigorous interest in qualitative methods. Many researchers now are looking beyond simply expanding computer software capacity as the answer on how to "do" science. The grip that the experimental model has had on policy research has been loosened. No longer is there overwhelming agreement that experimentation is "the only way for settling disputes regarding educational practice, the only way of verifying educational improvement, and the only way of establishing a cumulative tradition in which improvement can be introduced without the danger of a faddish discard of old wisdom in favor of inferior motives" (Campbell and Stanley, 1963:2, emphasis added). Two pithy phrases suggest the reorientation of much current policy research: "generalizations decay," and "statistical realities

do not necessarily coincide with cultural realities."

The qualitative perspective (synonymous terms used elsewhere include ethnography, ethnographic research, field work, field studies, naturalistic studies, and case study methodology) leads the investigator in quite different directions from those predicated upon experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Rather than presuming that human environments and interactions can be held constant, manipulated, treated, scheduled, modified, or extinguished, qualitative research posits that the most powerful and parsimonious way to understanding human beings and the social environments they have created is to watch, talk, listen, and participate with them in these environments (cf. Rist, 1977,1979,1981,1982). This is quite the opposite of claiming "to know" about human behavior by fracturing it into small, atomistic components that are then subjected to intensive scrutiny (as if teacher-pupil interactions and the internal structure of DNA both can be approached using the same logic of inquiry.) Qualitative research focuses on a different way of knowing--one based on experience, empathy, and involvement. These differences are caught in the German language with two terms for knowing--wissen and kennen, the former implying a quantitative and the latter a qualitative perspective on knowledge.

If one holds that generalizations decay, one can only reluctantly presume that policy research can, through the application of any research strategy, match the natural science goal of constructing theory and formulating theorems and laws. Indeed, qualitative perspectives would suggest that such a goal is quixotic at best

and extremely destructive at worst. The qualitative perspective would contend that to understand any social program or social setting, one must describe and analyze in an ecologically valid manner the values, behaviors, settings, and interactions of the participants. An additional strength of the qualitative approach comes in the emphasis on a longitudinal perspective, tracing out over time these values, behaviors, and interactions. Asking the question, "What is going on here?" is at once disarmingly simple and incredibly complex. It is to the answer of this question that qualitative research addresses itself.

From the advent of the "Great Society" program under President Johnson until recently, there was an unchallenged presumption that the answers to the "big questions" in U.S. policy research were to be found in "big studies." The Coleman Report of 1966, Equality of Educational Opportunity, for example, was but one among many such large studies, based on data collection with literally tens of thousands of students. Quantitative methods, employing computerized data bases, were used to address pressing problems in the policy arena. Much of the work done in this mode, however, was soon seen to be ephemeral. For some policymakers, it resulted in disenchantment with policy research and generated claims that research has no role in the policy process.

The rush to measure outcomes in programs that were themselves little understood (or not at all) meant that the findings from these large studies frequently were of little or no utility. As policymakers became more and more dissatisfied with material

they were receiving from the research community, they began pushing to refocus the efforts. Central to this push was the concern to learn exactly what program was in place and whether the implementation resulted in anything approximating the intentions of the policymakers who created and funded the effort. Once policymakers and researchers suspended the presumption that what had been anticipated did occur in fact, they had to refocus attention on finding out what "really" was going on. Policymakers have come to realize that it is politically and administratively dangerous to rely on outcome measures of program impact while they are still guessing at the processes that produced those outcomes.

Forging the Link

The task remaining is to make specific what has heretofore been general, to give examples of areas where qualitative research can inform the decision-making process. I should like to suggest at least four such opportunities for linking qualitative policy research and decision making. These four are not meant to exhaust the possibilities, only to indicate the ways in which contributions are possible.

A Respect for Diversity

It is a truism in social science research that the perceptions, values, and attitudes one holds about various issues are highly influenced by one's location in the social structure. Stated differently, not everyone holds to the same definitions of reality. While this may at first glance appear somewhat facile, the multiple ways in which the world might be viewed and understood has direct implications for policymaking and program operation. To wit:

while a policymaker may assume that intervention X will have impact Y, the recipients of that intervention may have understood and interpreted the actions quite differently, thus responding so as to create outcome Z--which for them was highly adaptive and successful. For the program administrator or policymaker, outcome Z was not anticipated or desired. Outcome Y was their goal, and in its absence, the program would most likely be judged a failure.

Quantitative work has been particularly unhelpful when shifts in understandings of program objectives or procedures have occurred. In a research mode where the outcomes are anticipated and predefined, "good research" becomes an effort at rigorously measuring whether the outcomes actually appeared. Lipsey et al. (1981:304) have noted:

> The standards of the profession are based on a statistical inference model in which the null hypothesis assumption of no program effect provides the starting point for evaluation. The burden of the research is to show contrary evidence. For this approach to be justified, we must have confidence that the actual program effects will be registered in the measures chosen and will emerge through the noise and confoundings associated with the implementation of research designs under field conditions. This is a large burden for a few measures and a "one shot" research design to carry. The frequency of null findings in evaluation research may be, in part, because this burden is too great.

The quantitative approach is a hindrance to answering questions of concern to policymakers when the program in question was implemented in ways quite different from those anticipated. The null hypothesis of no program effect can in these instances be easily proven because of the hiatus between what the researcher anticipated and what in fact was implemented. But is this conclusion of assistance to the policymaker when the impacts that did emerge are ignored?

Currently, many policy researchers are reacting against this mindset of assuming a priori the outcomes that are relevant and how they are to be measured. Stating "no effect" is really quite different than stating "effects were different from what we anticipated and were able to measure."

Qualitative research is appropriate to the articulation of the multiple ways in which people understand their world and react to it. By paying attention to the manner in which program recipients themselves define the situation and their needs, the policymaker can check these perceptions against his own. This is not to argue that the policymaker ought to take on and ascribe to the views and values of the participants, but only that this diversity should alert the policymaker to the competing definitions of the situation and/or problem.

Several key dimensions of qualitative research are germane to this contribution. First, qualitative research is longitudinal. It is predicated upon spending time--considerable amounts of time--with the various participants in a social setting. It works

to build trust and familiarity with the persons involved so that the researcher can go, in Erving Goffman's term, "backstage" to participate in events, discussions, and activities that never meet the public eye. A longitudinal perspective also allows the researcher to observe events over time. This vantage, in contrast to the cross-sectional approach of most survey and attitudinal research, respects the fact that the values, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals can and do change. What quantitative research has to treat as static, qualitative work can treat as fluid and constantly evolving.

A second aspect of qualitative research that contributes to this most complex (but, one hopes, more accurate) mosaic of a social setting or intervention is that behaviors and beliefs are examined in their context. This is particularly critical, for example, in developing school-to-work transition programs that accurately reflect the diversity of ways in which young people come into adulthood. To develop programs that presume a uniformity in the young is to guarantee that many young people will not benefit from them. Answering the question of "what works best for whom" necessarily suggests a diversity of strategies and of outcomes as well. Indeed, we have so little understanding of the cultures of the young and the ways in which they are constantly adapting that we find ourselves striving to rediscover the wheel as we create education and employment training programs for them (Berg, 1971; Rist, 1982a).

A third important contribution from committing oneself to a longitudinal perspective in research is that the presence of

the observer at the site allows for a continuity and ability to document the processes of change as they occur. The belief that intermittent or "hit and run" forays into the field are sufficient to chronicle the changes in the setting is presumptuous--unless, of course, one is content with brief surface descriptions, a presumption that leads to being surprised when situations turn out differently from what a quick glance might suggest.

The problem with this approach is that policymakers do not like to be surprised. They sponsor policy research so as to enhance their information base and be able to anticipate problem areas that will require their attention. It is this continuous relation to the field that gives the qualitative researcher a sense of patterns, of what is predictable, of how change is likely to be received (or rejected), and of what factors precipitated acceptance or resistance. Not to have this information leaves the policymaker to guess what the settings are "really like" or simply to dismiss differences and assume that settings elsewhere are like his own. Either assumption carries with it built-in risks--and the likelihood of more surprises.

Multiple Lines of Evidence as a Check on Statistical Portrayals

Beyond the open question in quantitative research of whether there is shared understanding of the concepts and measures that are employed, there is the concern with interpretation. Statistical data can often lead to mathematically correct but socially ludicrous conclusions (Sieber, 1973). Qualitative data can provide an

important "validity check" on statistical data. Predicating a policy response upon a statistical definition of the situation can badly miss the mark if the statistics obscure or miss important dimensions of the setting.

Qualitative research thus becomes a key component in multi-method studies. So many policy studies are predicated upon the single design, single method approach of gathering and analyzing quantitative data, that qualitative work can provide an important counterweight to analysis generated solely from statistical inference. Lispey, et al. see this approach as not only aiding the policymaker, but the field of policy research as well. They write (1981:303):

> We believe that the state of the art in evaluation research will advance more rapidly through increased use of multiple research designs and multiple lines of evidence within individual studies than through any foreseeable technical improvements in design and analysis or any futile hope that evaluators will suddenly be able to limit themselves to randomized experiments. An additional strength of evaluation through multiple lines of evidence, in our experience, is that it requires a much closer integration of quantitative information with qualitative information. Selection of multiple measures and designs, data probes and stratifications, and supplementary data collections must necessarily be based on an intimate understanding of program functioning, client response, and the vagaries of recordkeeping.

In contrast to strict statistical portrayals, qualitative research is in a distinct position to capitalize on the "human dimension" that pervades the political milieu in which policymaking occurs. Qualitative data can give the policymaker a "feel" for the setting, the program, and the participants that reams of statistical printouts can never match. Computer printouts are difficult mechanisms by which to convey the nuances of a setting or program, the enthusiasm of the participants, or the problems that have lead the program to the brink of disintegration.

The political arena in which policy is formulated is one where the key actors are not researchers. They are politicians or generalists, individuals who, of necessity, must "stay in touch," "cover their bases," "stay close to the folks back home," and any number of other such stock phrases. As a group, politicians function as arbitrators, mediators, reconcilers, and referees over the allocation of our collective resources. Qualitative research can speak to them with an authenticity, with a sense of "how things really are" that can allow them to utilize information relevant to their policymaking roles.

Examining the Unanticipated

The earlier discussion on respecting the complexity of the social world challenged the view that policy researchers can hold the world still long enough to maintain their experimental controls. The fact that such rigor is ever elusive allows for

events, situations, and outcomes to emerge that are not under "control". In short, there are opportunities for unanticipated consequences. Program managers know that confronting the unanticipated is an incessant part of their daily effort. Putting out brush fires is but another way of acknowledging that events, persons, and situations have a tendency to go their own way, not to act as predicted, and not according to the original script.

Research strategies not sufficiently flexible and open-ended to accommodate this ever-present serendipitous aspect of human behavior are doomed to reflect only that which stood still long enough to be measured in conventional ways. The irony of this is that these static aspects of the environment are often the least interesting, the least critical, and the least amenable to change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Research methods that can capture only the stationary because of the epistemological assumptions upon which they are built are strategies, as I have said, in an intellectual cul-de-sac.

Qualitative research puts no such constraints upon itself. The observation and study of behavior in natural settings emphasizes nonintervention, a willingness to use any setting as a research site, and allows events to go as they will. It is in this way that the noncontrived aspects of situations can be studied. Unanticipated events occur. Some are episodic and marginal. Others take on a central and profound importance. A close-in and longitudinal familiarity can not only document that such unanticipated events do indeed occur, but can also determine the relative importance

of these events upon the long-term adaptation and response of persons and organizations.

Program Implementation

In their 1978 assessment of previous large scale efforts in the United States to address the problems of youth unemployment, Mangum and Walsh posed the following question (1978:11):

> It seems fair to ask whether the assumptions upon which past youth programs were based were faulty, or whether the programs themselves were poorly designed or mismanaged.

The answer, as they themselves later suggest, is quite unknown. In large part this is because the research was not conducted to answer a simple but necessary question: what youth programs were actually implemented?

The process of moving from policy objectives to program results by means of effective implementation is one where most program managers are woefully uninformed. Indeed, Hargrove (1975) sees it as the "missing link" between policy formation and program operation. This view is supported by the Rand Corporation study of federal program implementation. The findings are quite consistent that federal programs are seldom implemented as they were designed (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978). The clean and crisp organizational charts developed by new programs often start to disintegrate before the ink is dry. Any number of unanticipated events or circumstances tend to deflect the program in other directions. The complexities of program administration seldom conform to the Weberian models

drawn from 19th century Prussian bureaucracies.

Successful program implementation necessitates an ability to postulate a causal chain of sequences that will allow the original policy objectives to be translated into program realities. Pressman and Wildavsky have described it as follows (1979: XXI):

> Policies imply theories. Whether stated explicitly or not, policies point to a chain of causation between initial conditions and future consequences. If X, then Y. Policies become programs when, by authoritative action, the initial conditions are created. X now exists. Programs make the theories operational by forging the first link in the causal chain connecting actions to objectives. Given X, we act to obtain Y. Implementation, then, is the ability to forge subsequent links in the causal chain so as to obtain the desired results.

Qualitative research is well suited to the study of the implementation process. The three examples of the application of qualitative research to policymaking noted in this section--respecting the complexity of the social system, providing a check on statistical interpretations, and studying the unanticipated consequences of social change--all are appropriate in the analysis of implementation. Each can contribute important insights into research that addresses how existing conditions, desired or otherwise, are obtained. The more the realization that the implementation process has to be treated as an independent

variable in any program assessment, the more imperative a qualitative perspective.

Postcript

The policy process is incremental and interactive. Perhaps 90 percent of the issues which a policymaker confronts are issues that have been faced before and will be faced again. They recur time and again. The policy process is seldom one of addressing new and uncharted problems. Rather, time is spent continually adjusting and responding to conditions in the society that demand a response from the public sector. In this context, those involved in providing information and analysis ought to quickly disabuse themselves of the notion that any one study or one report is likely to have a "major" impact. Perhaps some very few do, but they are clearly the exceptions. As noted in the introduction, increased sophistication and application of policy research leads to an increased understanding of the complexity of the problem, but not to an increased capacity for decision making. The tension between knowledge and action is not resolved. The actual linkage between research input and policy output remains tenuous.

Policy research is not social engineering, nor can it aspire to be. It is best suited to enlighten. Cronbach and his associates (1980:47) have recently written that "instead of promoting single definitive studies that promise unquestionable guidance on a narrow issue of policy, evaluations should be contributing to the slow, continuous, cumulative understanding of a problem or intervention." They also note, "What is needed is information

that will facilitate negotiation of a compromise rather than information that can be cranked into a decision rule (1980:16).

Qualitative research is the antithesis of research predicated on prefabricated and furtive encounters. Understanding the dynamics of program implementation, for example, will demand a long-term commitment to the in-depth study of multiple social programs. These kinds of demands are the raison d'etre of qualitative work. By taking us inside the social settings and organizations of our societies, it informs us of existing conditions as they are, not as we might hope them to be. Substituting understanding for presumption is no mean feat.

NOTES

*) The views expressed here are those of the author and no endorsement by the U.S. General Accounting Office or the United States Congress is intended or should be inferred.

1) Though the focus is on the "process", not the "event", decisions still do get made. Weiss offers a number of undirected strategies that can result in a decision (1982: 26-27): Reliance on custom and implicit rules; improvisation; mutual adjustment; accretion; negotiation, move and counter-move; a window for solutions; and indirection. Each of these she suggests can result in policy outcomes without "considered review or rational assessment."

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